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Prelude to War

Japan's Goals and Strategy in World War II

by

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May 1988

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SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED			1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS		
2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY			3. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF REPORT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited		
2b. DECLASSIFICATION / DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE					
4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)			5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		
6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION School of Advanced Military Studies, USAC&GSC		6b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) ATZL-SWV	7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION		
6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027-6900			7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		
8a. NAME OF FUNDING / SPONSORING ORGANIZATION		8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)	9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER		
8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)			10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS		
			PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.	TASK NO.
			WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.		
11. TITLE (Include Security Classification)  Prelude to War Japan's Goals and Strategy in World War II (U)					
12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Viale					
13a. TYPE OF REPORT Monograph		13b. TIME COVERED FROM _____ TO _____		14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 88/05/17	
15. PAGE COUNT 43					
16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION					
17. COSATI CODES			18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP			
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)  The purpose of this monograph is to show how a nation's goals may be translated into national strategy and how operational plans are developed based on that strategy. To do so, the monograph will use the example of Japan in World War II.  The paper consists of an introduction, a conclusion, and three parts. The first part begins with the events that led to increasing tensions, then hostility between the United States and Japan, and covers Japan's actions from the late 19th century to late 1941.  The weeks and days immediately prior to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor are included in the second part, which deals with the reasons Japan elected to wage war on the United States.  The last part of the paper identifies Japan's national objectives and examines the strategy by which she expected to accomplish them. It also shows the operational plans the Japanese military was to employ in the Pacific in support of the national strategy.					
20. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS			21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED		
22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL LTC Charles R. Viale			22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) (913) 684-3437		22c. OFFICE SYMBOL ATZL-SWV

DD Form 1473, JUN 86

Previous editions are obsolete.

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

UNCLASSIFIED

88 12 27 1992

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A-1

### ABSTRACT

PRELUDE TO WAR: Japan's Goals and Strategy in World War II  
by LTC Charles R. Viale, Infantry, United States Army.

The purpose of this monograph is to show how a nation's goals may be translated into national strategy and how operational plans are developed based on that strategy. To do so, the monograph will use the example of Japan in World War II.

The paper consists of an introduction, a conclusion, and three parts. The first part begins with the events that led to increasing tensions, then hostility between the United States and Japan, and covers Japan's actions from the late 19th century to late 1941.

The weeks and days immediately prior to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor are included in the second part, which deals with the reasons Japan elected to wage war on the United States.

The last part of the paper identifies Japan's national objectives and examines the strategy by which she expected to accomplish them. It also shows the operational plans the Japanese military was to employ in the Pacific in support of the national strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

Ideally, military operations should involve actions which have been carefully calculated to achieve the strategy of a nation, and national strategy should be based on the goals of the nation. That is, strategy should be designed to bring about the conditions that will allow the nation to achieve those things it determines to be in its best interests, and in addition to the armed forces, it utilizes political, psychological, and economic power to secure national objectives. If war is anticipated, military planners should examine the political objectives of the potential conflict and design a strategy, consistent with the application of other national power, that will accomplish them, or that will at least shape the conditions by which the national objectives may be realized.

Several questions must be asked by military planners. First, what is it that the nation expects to gain by fighting? Next, what political and military conditions must be achieved to secure those aims? The answers to these questions may be provided in part by political leaders, but may often have to be determined by military leaders based on their best judgment and their interpretation of national policy.

Once the determination of the factors constituting success is made, a strategy is developed that will bring about the desired

political conditions. Implementation of actions to achieve the strategy is the responsibility of the operational commanders. They have the forces: the ground combat units, the warplanes, the warships, and the support structures required to sustain them. The operational commanders link national strategy with operations. They structure the forces for the theater, deploy them, identify key objectives, and assign responsibilities and priorities for sustainment. They also provide for protection of the nation and its resources, and ensure the protection of their forces and bases. Finally, the operational plans are given to tactical commanders, who must take their pieces of the theater and execute the battles.

As mentioned at the beginning, this represents the ideal, for not all elements of this formula flow together at all times as they should. If there are problems in the system, they frequently exist at the strategic level, where specific political guidance is lacking or where the political objectives of the war are unrealistic, and the consequent strategy is flawed.

There are examples in history where the student of military and political events can reconstruct the frequently discussed, but rarely portrayed linkage between strategy, operations, and the political goals which drove them. One such example is that of Japan, where her reasons and plans for war against the United States and other Allies in World War II demonstrate the process

and provide the soldier a better understanding of his role in the formulation of national and military strategy, and the exercise of operational art in implementing those strategies. This paper, then, will examine the events which led to the war in the Pacific from 1941 to 1945, and will identify Japan's goals and strategy in that war.



## BACKGROUND

Supposing that a minor state is in conflict with a much more powerful one and expects its position to grow weaker every year. If war is unavoidable, should it not make the most of its opportunities before its position gets still worse? In short, it should attack....'

The single greatest point of contention between Japan and the United States of America prior to the Second World War was Japan's military action in China. Certainly, the threat of Japanese expansion throughout the Pacific was cause for grave concern in both Asia and the West, but Japan's aggression against China was foremost among the irreconcilable differences between the Japanese and the Americans. In order to understand Japan's reasons for initiating war with the United States in 1941, a brief examination of Sino-Japanese relations is warranted.

Although conflict between Japan and her large neighbor had occurred sporadically for centuries, a good starting point for examining Japan's modern interest in China is the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Fought to establish hegemony over Korea, the war resulted in a remarkable series of victories for the Japanese. Not only were the Chinese defeated in Korea, but the Japanese Army invaded and occupied Formosa, southern Manchuria

and the Shantung peninsula.<sup>2</sup> Japan's first foreign war in nearly three centuries, the Sino-Japanese War saw the westernization of Japanese life, the creation of a national government, the end of the Japanese feudal system, and the beginnings of Japanese territorial expansion.<sup>3</sup>

Japan's expansionism was aided by Europe's embroilment in World War I. "With her competitors busy in Europe and with the markets of both Asia and the West open to her as never before, she could easily have established herself as a creditor nation and raised the living standards of the Japanese people, but, unfortunately, her leadership preferred to play the power politics of territorial expansion, which in the end not only proved extremely expensive in financial terms, but laid the foundation for unhealthy domestic political developments which were to lead the nation into aggressive war in the 1930's."<sup>4</sup>

Japan entered the First World War on the side of the Allies, officially honoring her obligations to Great Britain under the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. This gave the Japanese license to attack and seize German holdings in China, which then led to demands upon the Chinese to acquiesce to Japanese expansion even further.<sup>5</sup> During the 1920's, however, Chinese nationalistic fervor threatened Japanese holdings in Manchuria, and the resulting paranoia, coupled with Japanese ultranationalism, led to the Japanese Army assuming a leading role in the formulation of policy in Manchuria.<sup>6</sup> Overt military action against the

Chinese can be traced to 18 September, 1928, when the Japanese Army launched a series of surprise attacks against garrisoned Chinese Army units throughout Manchuria. Within three years, the Army would create the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo, the government in Tokyo would accept the army's aggressive policies, and Japan would withdraw from the League of Nations after being condemned by that body.

From Japan's point of view perhaps the most significant aspect of the foreign scene from about 1927 onward was the dual threat in Northeastern Asia of Chinese nationalism and Russian communism. The Japanese seemed to think that the Asian heritage they shared with China should make their brand of imperialism more acceptable to the Chinese than that of the Western powers; consequently, they never really understood the nature of the resistance against them. They acted with brash assertiveness generally at the worst possible moment--and tried to smother Chinese resistance with Japanese slogans of peace. When they chose to rely finally upon the employment of brute force on an extensive scale, they simply compounded their original error. It was this decision in favor of force, which was first made in the field by subordinate military commands without the knowledge or consent of the government in Tokyo, that started Japan down the path which ultimately led, after many detours, to Pearl Harbor.<sup>7</sup>

Full-scale Sino-Japanese war began in 1937, with a skirmish between troops of the two armies that became known as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, so called because of its occurrence near a railroad junction of that name.<sup>8</sup> The Japanese government wished to settle the matter with local Chinese officials, but the Nationalist government in Nanking, in an effort to reestablish its influence in the area and to appease nationalistic ardor,

dispatched four divisions to the region. Japan advised Nanking against interfering with "local" affairs in north China and announced that she would meet any military contingency necessary.<sup>9</sup> Chiang Kai-shek responded by publicly declaring, "If we allow one inch more of our territory to be lost, we shall be guilty of an unpardonable crime against our race."<sup>10</sup> The Japanese government, however, "proposed to 'chastise' the Nationalist government for its mistaken and arrogant ways, and in January 1938, it defined the 'establishment of a new order' as the objective of the China War."<sup>11</sup>

As the Sino-Japanese War continued, the number of clashes between both US and British personnel and Japanese forces mounted, and American policy and public opinion became steadily more anti-Japanese.<sup>12</sup> Hundreds of protests concerning Japanese offenses against American lives and property in China were filed, including such incidents as the machinegunning of five American horseback riders by a Japanese plane while they were within the limits of the Shanghai International Settlement; the bombing of an American church for the ninth time, with suitable protests being lodged after each; and the sinking of the US gunboat Panay, the very day that two British gunboats and a merchantman were bombed.

But, when Japan signed the Tripartite Pact on 27 September 1940, and allied herself with Italy and Germany, the US clearly identified her as an aggressor nation. The United States

"curtailed, but did not end, oil and scrap iron shipments to Japan, and quadrupled the amount of assistance to Chiang Kai-shek's government."<sup>13</sup> A series of negotiations began in an effort to resolve differences between the two countries, but without success. "Basically, the American position was that Japan must abandon military means of handling the China and Southeast Asia situations and begin to withdraw her troops."<sup>14</sup> Japan's position was that she would not make military changes until the problems in China and Southeast Asia had been resolved in her favor--a requirement more of the Japanese Army than of the diplomats.

"The American answer to the impasse was on July 25, 1941 to freeze Japanese assets in the US, thus suspending all trade. The same course was followed by Britain, Burma, and India on the 26th and by the Netherlands Indies on the 28th. Thereafter Japan would have to get whatever oil she needed from the Axis."<sup>15</sup>

Eighty percent of the 100,000 barrels of oil Japan consumed each day came from California.<sup>16</sup> It was clear that she could not remain under the oil yoke of the United States if she were to realize her ambitions. But, what was the alternative? Where was Japan to turn for oil in the event of an American embargo? The answer lay in the rich fields of South East Asia, and just as she had taken advantage of the fixation of the European colonial powers on the pressing issues of World War I, Japan now saw the Netherland's preoccupation with German aggression as an

opportunity to grasp the oil centers of the Netherlands Indies (see map, next page).

As we think of the Middle East today as the heart of the world's oil supply, it was the East Indies in the pre-World War II period that represented unlimited reserves and never-ending production. Their rich oil fields were the prize for which Japan went to war. Oil was abundant there, and the Japanese were obsessed with gaining it. The Indies had been producing oil as far back as 1890, when the first wells of the Royal Dutch Shell Company began flowing. Total output from the Dutch-controlled fields in the 1930's about equaled the total production of all the countries of Europe outside of the Soviet Union. Each day, the fields of the East Indies yielded 170,000 barrels. They were manna to a fuel-poor nation like Japan. 17

For the Japanese people, continuous propaganda had instilled a commitment to austerity and sacrifice in the name of something called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. "This self-imposed mission, despite the murder, rape, and pillage it entailed, was somehow to become Japan's contribution to the maintenance of peace in the world."18 After the war, when the former Japanese Minister of War, Hideki Tojo, was questioned about Japan's motives, he replied that "she was not seeking to exploit others or to fill her own coffers. 'That was absolutely not the spirit of the Greater East Asia new order at all....The new order was based on mutual benefit.' "....The idea was initiative and guidance, not subjugation and subordination. The new order was to be based on mutual existence and prosperity and upon the autonomy and independence of all concerned."19 Furthermore, Tojo explained, China was crucial to Japan because



## Asia's Oil

Copied from Oil and War, by Robert Goraliski and Russell W. Freeburg (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1987), p. 146.

she possessed vast natural resources and represented a great potential market. While these same factors might also appeal to Europe and America, Japan's proximity to China made her highly susceptible to any disorder and chaos that might spill over into Japan. As the central Asian power, he rationalized, Japan was obligated by duty to ensure stability in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Anticipated for inclusion in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere were China, Hong Kong, Burma, French Indo-China, Thailand, Malaya, New Guinea, India, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and the Netherlands Indies.<sup>21</sup>

"Japanese of all persuasions looked at Japan's position in China as sanctioned by economic need and by their destiny to create 'a new order in Asia' that would expel Western influence and establish a structure based upon Asian concepts of justice and humanity. [The Chinese] government was regarded as an obstruction that had to be overcome on the way to this 'new order'...."<sup>22</sup> The Japanese Foreign Minister, Yosuke Matsuoka, shed a slightly different light on the matter when he said that "there was no doubt that Japan had been 'exceedingly annoying' to China. 'Japan is expanding,' he declared. 'And what country in its expansion era has ever failed to be trying to its neighbours? Ask the American Indian or the Mexican how excruciatingly trying the young United States used to be once upon a time. But Japan's expansion, like that of the United States, is as natural as the growth of a child. Only one thing



stops a child from growing:--death. '23

Similar to children, the growth of modern industrial nations is dependent on adequate supplies of energy, and Japan's economic and military planners were viewing their actions in China as much more than a battle against western encroachment in Asia, or to preserve China against the "death grip" of the communists.<sup>24</sup>

Not only was Manchuria a source of coal needed for Japan's industrial expansion program, but the region offered the promise of oil and shale. Synthetic oil could be made from the latter, and Japan's chemical industry formulated plans to develop a synthetic program. With China the most promising source of raw material, the Japanese government did not tolerate a weak Chinese government demanding unrealistic duties on first coal, then shale. Japan occupied Manchuria and established the puppet state of Manchuko. China's most promising energy resource was thus secured by Japan. <sup>25</sup>

Despite the establishment by Japan of an oil monopoly which barred western companies and guaranteed Manchuria's fossil energy reserves for herself, with the exception of the possibility of extracting oil from coal, China's potential was discouraging. It was clear that Japan would have to look elsewhere to fuel her industrial growth and to meet the demand for oil from her remarkable military build-up. She had increased the number of air squadrons from 54 in 1937 to 150 in 1941. In 1937, Japan had an army of 24 divisions. Three years later it stood at 50 divisions.<sup>26</sup> Between 1931 and 1937, Japan's petroleum consumption nearly doubled.

When the United States insisted on Japanese withdrawal from China, therefore, the Japanese saw the demand as unreasonable--it would negate a decade of foreign policy and military achievements, it would deny them their dream of a new Asian order, and it would reduce them to a second-rate power.

Putting up a bold front, being resolute, taking a strong stand had worked against Japan's weaker Asian neighbors but it failed against the more distant and powerful United States, which drew added strength--at least of conviction--by relying upon moral principles as a standard of measure in a world in which those principles were daily being flouted. In adhering to such a position, the United States helped create a situation in which Japan would ultimately be required...either to fight or back down. 27

As Japan looked toward South East Asia for her desperately needed resources, she tried unsuccessfully to negotiate the rights to almost exorbitant quantities of oil and other raw materials from the Netherlands Indies, but this effort failed. She also demanded occupation rights from the French for southern Indo-China, and while this brought protests from the Americans and British, the French Vichy Government had almost no choice but to give in. Each reaction to Japanese moves by the United States, Britain, China, and the Netherlands was viewed as plotting by these powers "to deny Japan her rightful place in the world by destroying her only means of self-existence and self-defense." 28 As General Tojo explained, Japan was placed in "extreme danger" by their hostile measures which compared "not... unfavorably with war itself." 29

So there the matter stood. Japan was not going to abandon her gains in China, for which "she was paying the price that the leadership of the races of Asia demanded,"<sup>30</sup> and the United States could neither tolerate the incessant Japanese aggression in South East Asia nor allow a Japanese-German alliance to defeat Britain and Russia. Any compromise of these issues "would almost inevitably be regarded in Japan as a demand for capitulation and, hence, as a justification for war."<sup>31</sup>

With each new crisis faced by the Japanese, their leaders took "another fateful step in line with the do-or-die psychology by which they gradually entrapped themselves,"<sup>32</sup> and the United States and Japan came more and more into open confrontation.

### Decision

Regardless of the motivations for it, the "New Order in East Asia" would be difficult to achieve without the necessary material means, and chief among these was oil. "The shortage of petroleum production was the key to Japan's military situation. It was the main problem for those preparing for war, and, at the same time, the reason why the nation was moving toward war."<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing that the war in China could not continue without the resources of South East Asia, the Army wanted to move south and take what the country needed, even if meant fighting the United States and Great Britain. The Navy, on the other hand, was initially reluctant to risk war and favored expansion southward by peaceful means. But political pressure, public opinion, and competition with the Army for assets and prestige caused them to reverse their position and join the hawks. "No voice,"

therefore, "questioned the vision of Japan taking advantage of the war in Europe to gobble an empire in Asia."<sup>2</sup> The Japanese Government committed itself to continuing the war in China and to expansion into South East Asia, to include possible attacks upon British possessions. If such actions prompted the United States to fight, Japan would be ready.

Several months later, during October 1941, the Japanese cabinet

met almost daily with the military supreme command to determine national policy and to reach a decision regarding war. The military leaders pressed for a rapid decision, citing statistics which showed Japan's oil reserves being depleted by 12,000 tons per day.<sup>3</sup> And while American naval strength was increasing rapidly, the Japanese Navy alone was expending 400 tons of oil per hour. "From the records available, it is clear that this time-oil factor hovered over the conference table like a demon and that a decision for war was the most readily available means of exorcising it."<sup>4</sup>

When the proposal for an attack upon the United States was brought up, the issue was not dealt with in the painstaking detail one might expect, particularly in regard to possible end-states. "Even if our Empire should win a decisive naval victory," the Navy Chief of Staff said, "we will not thereby be able to bring the war to a conclusion. We can anticipate that America will attempt to prolong the war, utilizing her superior industrial power, and her abundant resources. Our Empire does not have the means to take the offensive, overcome the enemy, and make them give up their will to fight." Japan would have to quickly seize strategic resources and military objectives, he said, and then wait for developments in the world situation.<sup>5</sup>

When specifically asked what the outcome of a war with the United States and Great Britain would be, the military chiefs said they could not predict the results, but they knew it would

be long and they could not expect the surrender of the United States. They added the possibilities that the war might end due to a change in American public opinion, or that they could somehow influence "other factors" to conclude the war.<sup>6</sup> "It was not that the Japanese military had forgotten that the war they proposed to start must have an ending. The question was there, merely the answer was missing."<sup>7</sup> Their attitude was best expressed by Hideki Tojo in a talk with the Japanese Premier, Prince Fumimaro Konoe, shortly before the latter's resignation:

...at some point during a man's lifetime he might find it necessary to jump, with his eyes closed, from [a] veranda...into the ravine below. That was his way of saying that he and others in the army believed that there were occasions when success or failure depended on the risks one was prepared to take, and that, for Japan, such an occasion had now arrived....Konoe merely replied that the idea of jumping from [a veranda] might occur to an individual once or twice in his lifetime but that as the premier of Japan, responsible for a 2,600-year-old national polity and a nation of 100,000,000 people, he could not adopt such an approach to the Empire's problems.<sup>8</sup>

Tojo replaced Konoe as premier on October 18, 1941, less than two months before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

For the most part, the conferees at the cabinet meetings suppressed their doubts and did not ask the questions that might elicit unpopular answers or determine gaps in logic. No one wanted to be thought a coward.<sup>9</sup>

A number of issues were discussed, however, and statistics were

provided by various government agencies to support the almost predetermined decision for war. A total of eleven questions regarding Japan's prospects in a war were studied.

Was there adequate transport to supply Japan's civilian and military needs? The president of the cabinet planning board answered affirmatively if certain estimates of losses and ship construction were accurate. No one questioned the figures or the circumstances of their applicability. In the event, actual shipping losses by Japan during the war were four times the predicted amount.<sup>10</sup>

What about oil? The Navy had enough for eighteen months of war, while the Army had only a year's supply. Japan would not only have to occupy the oil fields of the East Indies, she would have to ensure the oil's safe transport to Japan. With anticipated shipping losses, however, detailed studies indicated that she would face acute oil shortages by the third year of war.<sup>11</sup>

What were the prospects for military operations in South East Asia? The Army was confident of success providing the Navy did its job of maintaining surface traffic. Both services acknowledged that there would be difficulties and a long war must be expected. The "outcome would be determined by Japan's ability to keep abreast of the anticipated expansion of American strength."<sup>12</sup>

Will the United States enter the war if Japan moves south? Yes.

"...The United States had too much at stake to stand idly by while Japan annexed British and Dutch possessions in the Far East. There was the American role in the southwest Pacific, the American need for raw materials such as rubber and tin, the security and independence of the Philippines which would be menaced by the Japanese advance southward, the fate of China, and--last but not least--the pressure of American public opinion. Even if these factors had not existed, operational considerations alone would have led the Japanese supreme command to attack the Pacific possessions of the United States."<sup>13</sup>

Other issues that were addressed by the conference include: What will happen in the European war? If Japan moves south, what will the Soviet Union do? Can Japan support a war financially?

In each case, the answers supported the need for war, and a delay of hostilities beyond December was declared unacceptable. The military was adamant that the combination of the growing US build-up, Japan's diminishing oil stocks, and the need to take advantage of the best time of year for operations dictated action.<sup>14</sup> The Emperor was told by the president of the Privy Council:

If we miss the present opportunity to go to war, we will have to submit to American dictation. Therefore, I recognize that it is inevitable that we must decide to start a war against the United States. I will put my trust in what I have been told: namely, that things will go well in the early part of the war; and that although we will experience increasing difficulties as the war progresses, there is some prospect of success.<sup>15</sup>



As the Japanese leaders contemplated war, it must be noted that their predicament was no surprise to the United States. The US State Department had concluded in 1938 that an American oil embargo would force Japan to seize the oil facilities of South East Asia. President Roosevelt, in a note to his wife, confided that American restrictions on oil sales to the Japanese would be likely to drive them to attack the Dutch East Indies. Such action by the US, he continued, would encourage the spread of war in the Far East.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the United States Navy, when asked to assess the results of an oil embargo on Japan, concluded that it would "probably result in an early attack by Japan on Malaya and the Netherlands Indies, and possibly would involve the United States in an early war in the Pacific."<sup>17</sup>

The analysts, of course, were right. Japan made preparations for the attack on Pearl Harbor, with the date set for December 8th, Japanese time. Orders were also issued for attacks on the Philippines and Malaya. Meanwhile, diplomatic negotiations between the two countries were frantic with a sense of urgency. The Japanese proposal was that the United States and Japan agree not to use military force to advance in South East Asia or the South Pacific, excluding Indo-China which the Japanese conveniently already occupied. The two countries were also to ensure the access of each to the resources of the Netherlands Indies, and the United States was to supply Japan with one million tons of aviation fuel each year. In return, Japan would

agree to move her troops from the southern part of French Indo-China to the northern part, and Japan would agree "if necessary" to apply the principle of nondiscrimination in commercial relations to the Pacific and China.<sup>19</sup>

In Washington, American negotiators were shocked at the brashness of the Japanese proposal; many felt that its purpose was merely "to permit Japan to concentrate on a new military offensive aimed at finally conquering the long-suffering people of China."<sup>19</sup> Secretary of State Cordell Hull, aware of the criticality of the situation from American interception and decoding of Japanese messages, rejected the proposal, but made a final offer to Japan on 26 November 1941. In return for a withdrawal of Japanese forces from China and Indo-China, and the promise of nonaggression in South East Asia, Hull offered to reopen trade and assist in the economic stabilization of the Far East. By deliberate omission, it was understood that Japan could continue to pursue her interests in Manchuria. The Japanese cabinet, however, was aghast at the "harshness" of the American proposal, and reaffirmed the orders for attack.<sup>20</sup>

Japan's civilian and military leaders alike were imbued with the idea that compromise with the United States was impossible.

"They did not deny that war was a gamble; they simply treated it as a gamble that had to be faced. If Japan took the chance, she might be defeated, but if she did not, she would be defeated anyway; therefore, Japan should take the chance."<sup>21</sup>

The circumstances in Japan to this point are best summarized as follows:

Unquestionably most Japanese believed that their cause was a just one. They had been conditioned by long years of their own propaganda to believe that enemies were threatening them, first radical Chinese trying to deprive them of their property in Manchuria, then the Communist menace in East Asia, then American, British, Dutch, Chinese hostility and 'encirclement.' Those who criticized these ideas seriously were gradually eliminated from government until in the last two years before Pearl Harbor a grand sense of a positive national mission had come to pervade Japan. The idea of an 'East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere' which Japan was forging in 'Greater East Asia' was heralded as the ultimate Japanese purpose. It was to be a 'sacred war' led by a 'sacred emperor' who had no thought other than the happiness of Asian peoples. Japan was prepared to sacrifice much to attain her goals22

### Goals and Strategy

Not unlike other major powers in history, Japan desired a course of expansion that would make her the unchallenged leader of Asia. Her Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was the vehicle by which Japan would become the leader of the region, though not one of the other Asian nations or the Western powers had been offered the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they or their possessions were to be part of the new Asian order.

Certainly, the people of South East Asia had suffered exploitation by Western colonial powers, but a replacement of their European masters for Japanese offered few positive prospects. In fact, the Japanese had shown themselves to be brutal and ruthlessly exploitative in their occupations of both China and Korea.

In order to achieve her coveted position of Asian leadership, Japan's national objectives\*\* were to:

- \* Become economically strong and self-sufficient.
- \* Strengthen the military forces.
- \* Develop critical war industries.
- \* Improve air and sea transportation. 1

The accomplishment of these national objectives would require

\*\* The Japanese army gained a predominant role in government affairs beginning in 1938, and it was their expansionistic program, incorporating the above objectives, which became the official policy of the nation.

"the expansion of the heavy industries necessary to support a modern war machine, the integration of the economic resources of Manchuria into the Japanese economy, the establishment of a firm position on the Asiatic continent, and the acquisition of the strategic raw materials needed to make the nation self-sufficient."<sup>2</sup>

With the national objectives clearly established, how was Japan to achieve them? First, because attainment of the objectives required the exercise of force and the projection of power, the Army and Navy would have to be strengthened and expanded. Appropriations for military spending increased dramatically beginning in 1936, and the entire nation focused on preparing for war: industry was expanded, production of war materials was increased, and weapons, equipment and strategic raw materials were stockpiled.<sup>3</sup> We have already seen how the Army increased its divisions from 24 to 50, and its air squadrons from 54 to 150. The Japanese Navy, though limited until 1936 by the Washington and London Conferences, underwent a similar enhancement. Between 1922 and 1941, the combat tonnage of the Japanese Navy doubled, and it became more powerful than the combined Pacific fleets of Great Britain and the United States.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, with government subsidies encouraging ship building, by the end of 1936, Japan had the most modern merchant fleet in the world.

The second thing Japan would have to accomplish was to ensure

internal support of her policies and the consequent stringent measures that would be required by the Japanese people. Again, we have seen how propaganda and vigorous enforcement of conformity solidified public opinion, glorified nationalism, and stifled opposition and even serious criticism and questioning.<sup>6</sup>

In their estimate of world affairs, the Japanese saw only the United States and the Soviet Union as obstacles to the achievement of their national objectives. For Russia, the Konoe government favored a scheme of rapprochement, to include the formation of a pact between Japan, Germany, Italy, and the USSR which would establish spheres of influence for each nation and would prevent American interference in their efforts to bring a new order to the world. But, growing hostility between the Germans and Russians made the pact impracticable, so a less ambitious plan was adopted. Accordingly, the Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact was signed on 13 April 1941.<sup>6</sup>

To prevent American interference with her scheme, Japan decided on a combination of a rapid seizure of strategic areas, and operations by her allies. If Japan could quickly gain control of the key regions of the Pacific and secure the lines of communication within them, she would present the United States with an almost invincible posture.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Italy and Germany would be encouraged to step up their attacks against American shipping in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, threaten Central and South America, and launch the invasion of England.

For her part, Japan would cut communications between Great Britain, Australia, and India, then seize Burma and grant her independence, thereby encouraging India to demand her own independence.<sup>9</sup>

With Britain's inevitable capitulation, threats to US interests in the Western Hemisphere, and the strength of the Japanese position in the Pacific, the United States was expected to see the futility of fighting and accept Japanese terms for peace. As added assurance, propaganda would be used to appeal to antiwar sentiments in America.

Although we have already seen how the potential opposition of Russia to Japanese intentions was nullified, the USSR played a much more important role in long-range Japanese plans, one that went well beyond the neutrality pact between the two nations. If the Germans and Russians could be persuaded to make peace, the Soviet Union could enter the war on the side of the Axis, and Japan might then support Russian advances into both India and Iran.<sup>9</sup> Had Hitler and Stalin accepted such a plan, one wonders what our world maps might reflect today. The implications are staggering.

To secure the resources of South East Asia and to quickly destroy the military opposition of the United States and Great Britain, Japan developed four strategic options:<sup>10</sup> (see oil map, page 10)

1. Seize the Netherlands Indies, then the Philippines and

Malaya.

2. Advance methodically from the Philippines to Borneo, then Java, Sumatra, and finally Malaya.

3. Reverse the above course by starting with Malaya and ending with the Philippines, thus delaying an attack on American territory until last.

4. Simultaneously attack the Philippines and Malaya, followed by converging attacks on the Indies.

The first plan was deemed unacceptable because it would expose Japanese forces and their lines of communication to attack from both the Philippines and Malaya. The Navy advocated the second plan. It would allow early seizure of US bases in the Philippines which sat astride lines of communication, and it would allow a cautious advance south, securing air and naval bases from which to operate in each phase. The Army, however, said that Plan Two would allow the Allies to strengthen their defenses in the Netherlands Indies and Malaya while Japan was fighting in the Philippines. The Army favored Plan Three. It allowed the early seizure of critical resources and delayed attacks on American bases as much as possible. But, the Navy was opposed to Plan Three, arguing that the risk of exposing their lines of communication to American naval and air forces was too great.

This left Plan Four, which called for simultaneous attacks against the Philippines and Malaya, followed by sweeps into the



Indies from opposite directions. Although this plan would eliminate the US threat in the Philippines while placing Japanese forces in Sumatra, Java, and Borneo more quickly than Plan Two, it required a dispersion of forces, advance along two axes, and posed difficult coordination problems. But, it compromised the positions of the Army and Navy and was therefore adopted.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to implementing the plan, Japan gained a more advantageous position by the occupation of French Indo-China. This not only gave the Japanese a base from which to intercept supplies being sent to Chiang Kai-shek, it permitted bombing attacks on the Burma Road and on targets in southern China.<sup>12</sup> Equally important, her occupation of Indo-China gave Japan bases from which to launch attacks on Singapore, the Philippines, and the Netherlands Indies.<sup>13</sup>

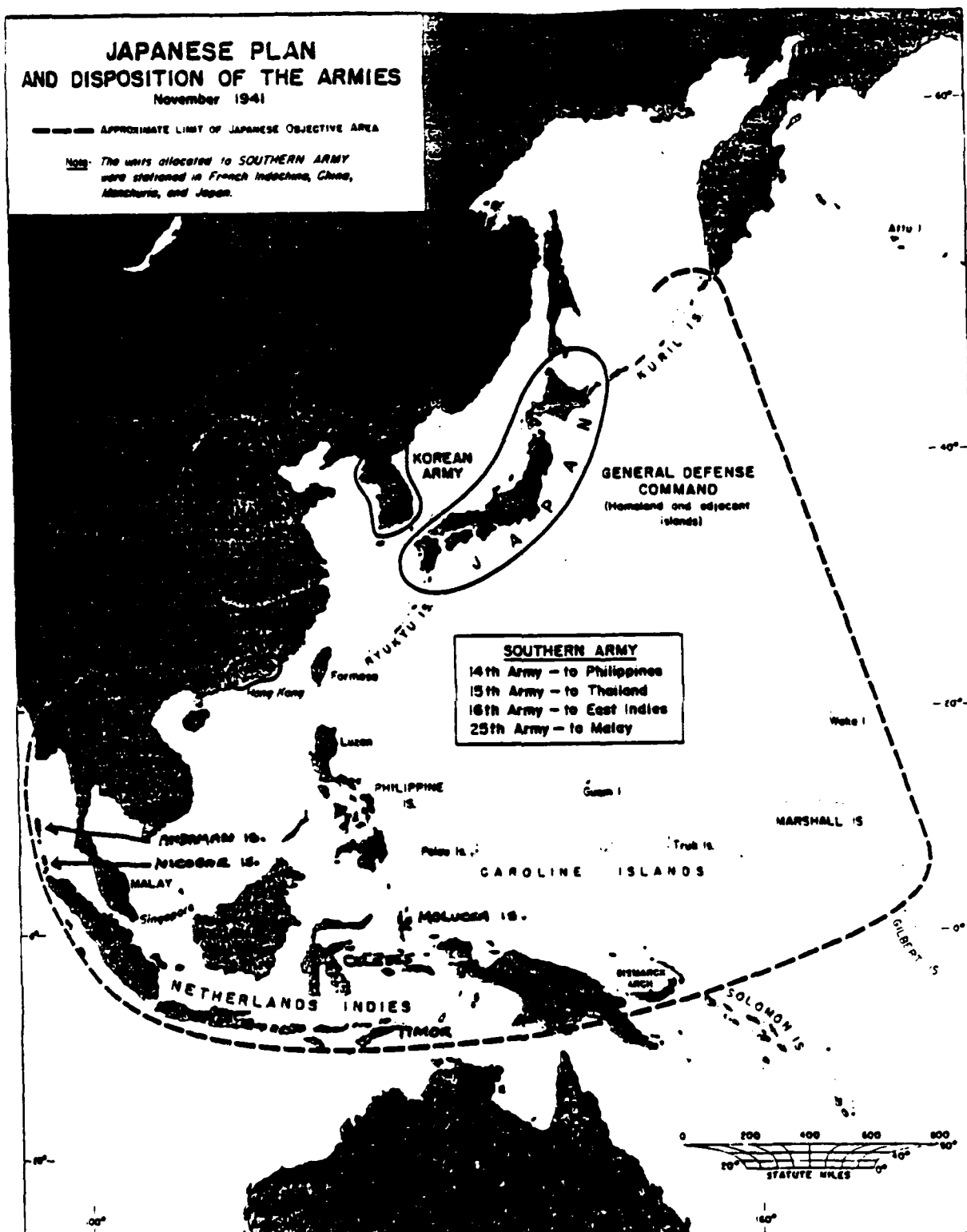
With the strategy established, the Army and Navy general staffs were directed to develop operational plans. For two months they devoted themselves to the task and by 20 October 1941, they were ready.

The concept called for the conquest of a huge defensive triangle within which Japan would control the resources she needed to achieve her national objectives (see map, next page). On the first day of war, Japanese forces were to attack the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, and immediately afterward conduct strikes to destroy American naval and air forces in the

# JAPANESE PLAN AND DISPOSITION OF THE ARMIES November 1941

--- APPROXIMATE LIMIT OF JAPANESE OBJECTIVE AREA

Note: The units allocated to SOUTHERN ARMY were stationed in French Indochina, China, Manchuria, and Japan.



Copied from "Japan's Decision for War," by Louis Morton,  
Command Decisions, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield, (Washington:  
Dept of the Army, 1960), p.107.

Philippines and attack British bases in Malaya. Advance Army units were then to be landed in the Philippines, Malaya, and Borneo, followed by full-scale invasion and occupation of these areas. Troops were also to seize Hong Kong, the United States islands of Guam and Wake, and the Bismarck Archipelago (off the coast of New Guinea).<sup>14</sup>

During this same period, advance air bases were to be seized in the Celebes, southern Sumatra, the Moluccas, and Timor (just north of Australia to the south of the Celebes), which would be used for air attacks on Java in preparation for the island's invasion. The British fortress at Singapore would not be attacked from the sea, as expected, but would be taken by moving from Malaya on the land side. From there, the Japanese could invade northern Sumatra, then western Java, while troops moving from the East attacked Java from that direction. Finally, air bases in southern Burma would be seized, followed by occupation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands off the coast of Thailand.

Once their positions were consolidated and the new bases strengthened, "...they would form a powerful defensive perimeter around the newly acquired empire in the south, the home islands, and the vital shipping lanes connecting Japan with its new sources of supply. With these supplies the Japanese thought they could wage defensive war indefinitely."<sup>15</sup>

After initial operations, the Navy planned to intercept United States naval forces with a strong Pacific fleet and to occupy or

destroy New Guinea, New Britain, Samoa, Midway, the Fiji Islands, the Aleutians, and parts of Australia. The submarine fleet was to operate in Hawaiian waters and off the American west coast to observe the movements of the United States Pacific Fleet and to conduct attacks on shipping. The Pearl Harbor Striking Force was to assist in operations in South East Asia after accomplishing its initial mission, while another surface fleet was to protect Japanese waters and remain alert for possible Soviet actions.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the neutrality pact with the Soviet Union, Japan recognized the possibility of a Soviet attack, either independently or in cooperation with the United States, and strengthened Japanese forces in Manchuria. If the Russians should attack, plans were made to meet Soviet forces with Army units from Manchuria supported by air forces deployed from the home islands or China.

Despite the obvious coordination difficulties between ground, air, and maritime forces dispersed over such a vast area, execution of Japanese plans was not assigned to joint or unified organizations, but was left to the services themselves.

"Separate agreements were made between Army and Navy Fleet commanders for each operation. These agreements provided simply for co-operation at the time of landing and for the distribution of forces."<sup>17</sup>

The Japanese Army and Navy staffs recognized that the key to the

success of their plan was the destruction of the US Pacific Fleet, and although it may not have been identified as such, it was the center of gravity of the United States. To destroy the American center of gravity, Admiral Yamamoto devised the plan for the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Tokyo Naval War College exercises had shown the plan to be feasible, but the Navy General Staff felt it to be far too risky. The attack force could be discovered enroute, they argued, or the United States Fleet might not be in port. Only by threatening resignation did Admiral Yamamoto cause them to adopt his plan.

Just as important as addressing the enemy center of gravity is to identify and protect one's own. Again, it may not have been labeled as such, but the Japanese center of gravity was their lines of communication for resources and for sustaining their extended forces. They protected their center of gravity by establishing what they considered to be an almost impregnable defensive perimeter.

Fred Charles Ikle criticizes military leaders for "designing wars as if they had to build a bridge that spans only half a river," and also faults civilian leaders for ordering the start of campaigns that have no plan for ending the war.<sup>10</sup> The Japanese recognized the danger of war with the United States, but they hoped to execute their plans violently and quickly, secure their objectives, and "set up a defense in such depth and of such strength that the Allies would prefer a settlement to

the long and costly war that would be required to reduce these defenses."<sup>19</sup> We now have the advantage of viewing recorded facts, but when all events lay in the future and depended solely on resolute action and fate, the decisions of the Japanese leaders are much more understandable:

In the view of the leaders of Japan, there was no honorable choice but war. The United States and Great Britain, they were convinced, were bent on destroying Japan or reducing it to a minor power. Submission was unthinkable and Japan had no alternative, 'but to resolutely plunge into war' while it still had the power to do so. The nation entered the war, wrote a prince of the Imperial family, 'with a tragic determination and in desperate self-abandonment.' If it lost, 'there will be nothing to regret because she is doomed to collapse even without war.'<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Soldiers are charged by the societies they serve with developing military strategy that will secure national goals. They are also expected to implement strategy with sound operational plans. The case of Japan in World War II has provided for professional military study the process whereby a nation's political objectives, strategy, and operational plans can be demonstrated to portray a coherent flow in a modern conventional war scenario.

We began by discussing the background of the war between the United States and Japan in order to view these events as they impacted on the determination of Japanese national objectives, and why Japan's leaders believed war was necessary. We then looked at the strategy they developed to achieve their national goals. From that strategy, we saw the operational plans by which it was to be implemented.

As we have seen, Japan's national goal was to become the unchallenged leader of Asia. In order to do this, she had to become economically and militarily strong, which required unimpeded access to raw materials and oil. Manchuria and South East Asia were the places she turned for resources, and Japan saw it as her destiny to replace the European colonial powers and establish her own region of hegemony with what she called

the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The military strategy that Japan devised called for a rapid seizure of the resources of South East Asia by a two-pronged attack beginning in the Philippines and Malaya, and converging on the Netherlands Indies. Operationally, the Japanese Army and Navy planned to establish a defensive triangle around Japan and her new empire in China and South East Asia, coupled with a surprise attack to destroy the United States' center of gravity, the Pacific Fleet. Having secured their lines of communication and ensured access to the raw materials needed by industry, the Japanese expected to conduct a defense in depth, and intercept and defeat United States efforts to penetrate their far-ranging perimeter.

The Japanese made mistakes. Their political goals, and consequently their strategy, were flawed in that they believed they could carve out a twentieth century Asian empire, and thereby drastically alter not only the regional but the world balance of power. Another error was the misjudgment of the extent of American wrath and tenacity after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

In the introduction, we said that military planners must know the desired end-state, or the conditions they must achieve that will constitute success. The Japanese, however, launched the war without a well-defined vision of a conclusion. They seemingly jumped with their eyes closed, and have been criticized for



doing so. Did they build their bridge only half-way across the river? Yes, but for them the bridge was never intended to reach the other side--if the far bank was defined as defeat of the enemy. They knew this was implausible. Control of the resources of South East Asia and the conquest of China would accomplish the objectives for which Japan would go to war. Having gained these, it was her intention to cause her enemies to accept peace on Japanese terms.

While we may understand the despair the Japanese felt as they saw their plans for empire dim in light of western intransigence, we cannot forgive the Japanese military for allowing the war to be started. Despite the clamor for action, the professional soldier must judge the situation unemotionally and render his assessment without regard to political or other pressures. If war is to be fought, the plans must provide not only for the achievement of political goals, but do so against the full extent of action of which the enemy is capable. Plans that seize initial objectives then transition to a permanent defense and wait for divine intervention or a favorable change in world affairs are unacceptable. Likewise, military leaders whose decision processes may be likened to leaping from verandas can hardly be said to be acting in the best interests of their country.

If the US was to be attacked and brought to war, the Japanese military was obligated to devise plans that would sequence major

events up to the conceivable conclusion. Variations to the original concept should have been anticipated so that Japan would retain the initiative while keeping her focus on the end-state.

Where does this leave us? If the armed forces of a nation are incapable of achieving the conditions whereby national goals can be realized, then political leaders must be advised against war. That part is easy. What isn't easy is forecasting success. But, while the friction of war may leave the outcome of most events uncertain, the scales can be tipped to one's advantage by thorough planning, including what we call branches and sequels for variations that could occur.

No plan, however, is without risk. Risk in war is a calculated uncertainty that we recognize and reduce to an acceptable level by sound planning. The "attack, then hope" approach of the Japanese was not risk, it was recklessness--a recklessness that permeated Japanese leadership. The Emperor himself, when briefed by the privy seal regarding the mood and direction of the Japanese cabinet, epitomized his nation's outlook toward the pending war:

There is a saying, isn't there? "You cannot obtain a tiger's cub unless you brave the tiger's den....":

## ENDNOTES

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- 9 Ibid., 315.
- 10 Ibid., 317.
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- 12 Butow, Tojo, 316.
- 13 Ibid., 318.
- 14 Morton, Strategy and Command, 114.
- 15 Pyle, 148.
- 16 Goralski and Freeburg, 98.
- 17 Ibid., 102.
- 18 Butow, Tojo, 322.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Bingham, Conroy, Ikle, quoting Japanese cabinet members, 573.
- 21 Butow, Tojo, 320.
- 22 Bingham, Conroy, Ikle, 574.

#### GOALS AND STRATEGY

- 1 Morton, Strategy and Command, 49-50.
- 2 Ibid., 50.
- 3 Louis Morton, "Japan's Decision for War," Command Decisions, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield (Washington, D.C.: US Army Office of Military History, 1960), p.100.
- 4 Morton, Strategy and Command, 56.
- 5 Bingham, Conroy, Ikle, 575-577.
- 6 Hosoya Chihiro, "Japan's Policies Toward Russia," Japan's Foreign Policy, 1866-1941, 383.
- 7 Butow, Tojo, 328.

8 Ibid., 329.

9 Ibid.

10 Morton, Command Decisions, 106.

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12 Morton, Strategy and Command, 59.

13 Morton, Command Decisions, 106.

14 Morton, Strategy and Command, 104.

15 Morton, Command Decisions, 110.

16 Morton, Strategy and Command, 109-111.

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18 Ikle, 6.

19 Morton, Strategy and Command, 125.

#### CONCLUSION

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